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SUBJECT: NINEWA COUNCILWOMEN UNITE TO EMPOWER IRAQI WOMEN

Summary

¶1. (U) PRT Nineva recently initiated a series of discussions with several prominent female local government leaders to discuss obstacles and ways forward on women's empowerment issues, including institutional discrimination and traditional attitudes regarding gender roles. Recognizing the need for more awareness of these issues and leadership training, the women offered several suggestions for an upcoming U.S. military-sponsored women's conference. PRT intends to continue facilitating such discussions in pursuit of broader U.S. objectives. End Summary.

Female Leaders Face Institutional Discrimination

¶2. (SBU) PRT members participated in an initial meeting on April 28 and a May 8 follow-on meeting hosted by seven female elected and appointed provincial government officials. The women were from the province's Sunni Arab, Sunni Kurd and Christian communities. The participants discussed the systemic gender discrimination that they face from their male peers. One lawyer and newsletter editor observed that the male-dominated council regularly discounts ideas presented by women but, when presented by men, the same ideas are immediately pushed forward. Another woman, who works with the women's education and economic empowerment in rural Nineva, similarly noted that she is not greeted with the same respect as males during her visits to local districts in spite of her rank.

¶3. (SBU) Another woman, who works with reconstruction and election issues, attributed discrimination to national political trends and asserted that the Iraqi parliament would consist of significantly less than its current twenty-five percent women if there were not USG pressure for women's participation. She elaborated that men in parliament often step forward publicly with democratic ideas and support for women's rights but still privately believe women should only be mothers and homemakers. A woman who works with education generated some discord by expressing sympathy for this traditional view of gender roles. Referring to the Koran, however, she agreed that women should be "full partners" in political and economic decision making long as they "know their limits."

Ways Forward: Media Campaigns and Leadership Training

¶4. (SBU) Moving beyond these differences and calling for action, one woman insisted that it is not enough for women to understand their rights -- men also need to know that women can be equal partners. Her colleagues generally concurred with her contention that the most effective way to counter the root causes of gender bias, such as the relative absence of strong role models for young Iraqi women, is to work through local media to conduct awareness raising campaigns. They also agreed on the importance of establishing a women's "watchdog" NGO which would focus on how laws affect women's

rights.

¶15. (SBU) All the women agreed that for these programs to be effective women must have more training opportunities like the upcoming Multi-National Division-North women's conference. Many women said they were particularly interested in additional focus on legal obstacles to women's rights, including legislation banning women from serving as judges, the government's failure to protect women from so-called "honor killings," and guarantees of education to young girls. In addition, they said they are interested in practical training in leadership, budgeting, public speaking and economic empowerment.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The PRT's series of meetings with women leaders highlighted both the capacity and the courage of Ninewa's women. Their refined suggestions for future training programs will serve as a jumping off point for PRT efforts to facilitate opportunities for women in the province and encourage networking across ethnic and sectarian boundaries.

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